

SOUNDWORK

What Sound Can Do: Listening with Memory

MEGAN ROBERTSON

The soundwork audio file is openly available online at: <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/189051/186960>

When [Simon Fraser University] opened in 1965, there was a department that was created that was the Centre for Studies in Communications and the Arts. Nobody knew what that was except that they were going to hire a couple of artists and Communication people and we were to discover our own identity, what we would be doing together.

– R. Murray Schafer¹

IN 1965, R. MURRAY SCHAFFER was one of the first people hired at Simon Fraser University's (SFU) School of Communication. When Schafer took up a position at SFU, he moved from southern Ontario to Vancouver. This move was a dramatic sonic shift; Schafer was familiar with the brick and stone structures of Ontario that were well insulated for the winter. Vancouver's architectural turn to modernism in the 1970s, which included larger windows and glass expanses, meant that buildings on Canada's West Coast allowed far more ambient noise into living and work environments. Schafer's early work in British Columbia reflected, in part, his attempt to make sense of his noisier environment by emphasizing the importance of protecting sonic space from industrial and mechanical incursions. However, his most well-known work during his tenure at SFU, is the World Soundscape Project (WSP).

In 2009, I was hired as a research assistant for a project called "Listening with Technology," headed by Dr. Jan Marontate at SFU's School of Communication. The goal of this project was to examine the legacy and influence of the WSP and how successive generations of recordists determined conventions and best practices for their work and the

¹ R. Murray Schafer, interview by Jan Marontate, 21 March 2011.

presevation of their recordings. For over forty years, researchers and recordists based at SFU have collected ambient sound and soundwalks in Vancouver, the Lower Mainland, across Canada, and a number of sites in Europe. The Vancouver soundscape collection contains longitudinal recordings collected in the 1970s, the 1990s, and from 2009 to the present. The individuals responsible for making the recordings come from a range of backgrounds: composers, environmentalists, architects, musicians, and sound technicians. My initial work on the Listening with Technology project involved conducting bibliographic research on the preservation of sound recordings and best practices associated with documenting sound. In my review of literature I turned to scholars, artists, and composers – people interested in questions about how we perceive the world, how we engage with the world, and how we influence the world. The Listening with Technology project also challenged me as a researcher. It demanded alternative ways of engaging with my subject material: it was necessary to turn off the impulse to deconstruct and to critique in favour of a sensorial engagement that calls upon memories and emotions. What I have learned is very much influenced by readings in memory studies and affect – particularly Jill Bennett’s question, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze, about what art *does* rather than what art means.² If we are to consider what soundscape recordings do, we need to consider connections and relationships.

Hildegard Westerkamp, a key contributor to the WSP and a renowned composer, radio artist, and sound ecologist, describes the relationships between sounds, environments, and listeners as a series of ongoing negotiations between who listeners imagine themselves to be and how they perceive the world around them. In a 1995 presentation titled “Listening to the Listening,” Westerkamp suggests that the space between a sound and a listener’s experience of that sound is a space of potential. However, she also warns that attempting to pre-emptively frame this space in a particular gendered, “physical, technological, social, religious, political, [or] environmental” way detracts from the very practice of attending to how people actually listen.³

Preparing to interview the recordists, I started to listen to some of the WSP recordings. One recording in particular gave me pause. On 16 March 1973, one of the WSP recordists, Bruce Davis, recorded a Vancouver trolley bus travelling eastbound on Hastings Street. This is

² Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3.

³ Hildegard Westerkamp, “Listening to the Listening,” *ISEA95*, at http://interact.uoregon.edu/Medialit/WFAE/library/articles/westerkamp_listening_listen.pdf.

part of that recording. (<http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/189051/186960>) I hear conversations between people, the familiar whine and hum of the electric bus, and then a sound I have not heard in over two decades – coins being collected in the fare box. Suddenly and unexpectedly a memory of being on a bus with my brother and my grandmother overwhelms me. We are travelling westbound on Kingsway; I step down the stairwell to exit the rear of the bus, following my brother. I'm too small to activate the doors and the bus pulls away, leaving my brother on the sidewalk and my grandmother and me on the bus. We disembark at the next stop and return to my brother where he waits with a garage attendant.

This moment of contemporary listening was and is very much a space of potential as Westerkamp describes it. The vividness of the memory and the layers of emotion that come with it are unexpected. I doubt they would be evoked if I were “reading” an account of public transit in Vancouver in the 1980s. Sitting in a laboratory space at SFU with headphones on – not reading, not writing, not browsing the Internet – just listening, this memory was brought back to me. While this type of memory has much in common with Marcel Proust’s involuntary memory whereby a moment of sensory perception gives way to an unanticipated recollection of memory, the remembering I did that afternoon in a university lab happened, in part, because I was consciously engaged in a focused type of listening – something that I rarely do.

When we are compelled to stop and look carefully at a particular object, or to stop and listen carefully to a particular sound, I think that we are responding to what scholar Stephan Greenblatt has identified as the phenomena of resonance and wonder. Writing about models for art exhibitions, Greenblatt contends that objects that evoke wonder, “stop the viewer in his or her tracks . . . convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, [and] evoke an exalted attention.”⁴ Objects that evoke resonance “reach out beyond [their] formal boundaries to the larger world [and] evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces” that contributed to the creation of those objects.⁵

Wondrous moments of perception, whether they are visual or auditory, cause us to pause, while resonant moments give us pause to think about “a series of implied, only half-visible relationships and questions.”⁶ In the

⁴ Stephan Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 45.

case of the WSP recordings, the resonant questions that surface include: Why were these particular events or spaces deemed worthy of recording? Who are the people we hear in half captured and muffled conversations as they pass through the recording space? Questions like these lead us into intellectual engagements with the WSP archive in which we seek to find information to fill in our own understandings as we go about the process of meaning making.

In their 2010 article titled “Sound Acts: Elocution, Somatic Work, and the Performance of Sonic Alignment,” Phillip Vannini and colleagues use the term “sound act” to refer to what sounds do from a phenomenological and interactionist perspective.⁷ The authors note that sound acts prompt human action by spurring reflexive awareness and occasioning affective responses. The instances described in the article – the sonic jarring of a children’s television cartoon and the barking of a neighbour’s dog, for example – each evoke different emotions, which centre the listener within a particular environment. In my case, listening to the recording of the bus trip raises a feeling of fear: What if we never return to my brother? What if this bus driver refuses to stop? The remembrance of time past is shaped by my contemporary anxieties when I try to imagine myself back to that moment of my childhood: How could I not be afraid? And yet how could I? I have complete faith that my grandmother will guide us safely through our travels. I try to recover this type of childhood trust because I do know what happens next: we meet my brother and return to my grandmother’s house. Vannini et al. describe this somatic response to sound as the way in which a person perceives his or her environment, deals with acoustic stressors that can prompt troubling memories and emotions, and responds in such a way that he or she moves towards a desired place of sonic, social, and emotional harmony.

At first, this notion of a desired harmony may seem naïve. However, Vannini et al. acknowledge that, “like musical harmony, the embodied deeply personal and social harmony of somatic orders is improvised and scored, a negotiated give and take, and a dimension where both harmony and discord are possible.”⁸ So, when we somatically perceive and engage with the world around us, we are constantly working through imbalances and inconsistencies transform our environments, they become dynamic spaces of potential.

⁷ Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, Simon Gottschalk, and Carol Rambo, “Sound Acts: Elocution, Somatic Work, and the Performance of Sonic Alignment,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39 (2010): 328–53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

Spaces of potential may be hard to come by in our increasingly fast-paced world, where we are always connected but seemingly only half attending to our actual environments. Visual culture scholar and curator Irit Rogoff (2010) emphasizes that meaningful participation and collaboration in a particular space depend on a connection that is not voluntary, not prescriptive, not an external model of organization but something that takes place among ontological communities.⁹ Rogoff uses the term “implication” to speak to the entanglement of multiple forms of subjectivity that occur within particular situations. Implicatedness is connected to mutuality and potential. Rogoff states that a particular environment can present itself as an occasion in which borders between objects and subjectivities are set aside in order to consider how people actively and continuously create and participate in the world around them.

In thinking about how this notion of implication might have parallels in the study of sonic environments and acoustic ecology, I return to Hildegard Westerkamp’s assertion that a listener’s experience of sound is a space of potential. When we listen with an awareness of mutuality, we can become aware that there are multiple perspectives on, and multiple understandings of, the same soundscapes. This awareness of multiplicity and mutuality, of the fact that there are other ways of perceiving that are just as affective as our own, is conditioned by temporality. In contrast to an exhibition space where we can look at the objects on display at our own leisure, a soundscape is materially elusive. As anthropologist David Samuels and others note:

Sound recording allows for the temporal dislocation of a sound from its time and place of origin, but does not facilitate the ability to do the auditory equivalent of sustaining the gaze on an image for as long or as short as one desires. Thus even though sounds can be reproduced and replayed, sound is often considered to have, by its nature, a kind of temporality that the visual may not share.¹⁰

The fixity associated with visual perception, the fact that I can return again and again to an image or an object that remains the same, does not hold true in the case of auditory perception.

⁹ Here, Rogoff draws on Hannah Arendt’s notion of a space of appearances where people bracket their social, political, and cultural identities and understandings to engage in an exchange rooted in the recognition of a common humanity. Irit Rogoff, “The Implicated,” keynote presentation, International Visual Studies Association Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, 6–8 July 2014.

¹⁰ David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, “Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 338.

When I was fully open to the possibility of auditory perception – just listening – it was as if a kind of temporal folding occurred whereby how I perceived the world as a child on a bus in Vancouver joined with how I perceive the world as an adult and found new appreciation for these two very different perceptive lenses.

Try as I might, I cannot recreate this moment of involuntary memory. With repeated listening to the recording of the trolley bus, I try to critically analyze what I hear: maybe that is not the same kind of bus that I was on, I was sure I had heard the hum of the bus engine more clearly the first time, was that really what the doors sounded like over twenty years ago? When I start to ask these questions about particular aspects of the recording, I am not engaging with sound on a perceptive level – I am engaging with it on an intellectual level. By trying to listen for something I am expecting to hear, I am no longer open to the potential that exists in a particular soundscape. However, by constructing the stories of who we are, and being open to both share and to listen to the stories of others, any particular occasion begins to reveal its potential.